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ABSTRACT

The concept of excellence is explored in relation to various dimensions. Since the time of ancient Greece, there has been difficulty in defining "the Good," or the nature of human excellence. It is suggested that "the Good" of which excellence is an important part is a fundamental concept of the human personality, and that fundamental concepts cannot be defined. However, it is possible to recognize human excellence in a number of dimensions: physical, mental, moral, and social. It proposed that despite these philosophical problems, there is a need for proper understanding of how human beings can acquire and develop excellence. There are basically four qualities that comprise excellence--efficiency, persistence, courage, and dexterity--in different degrees and combinations. According to Shakespeare, humans have two powers that distinguish them from animals: the power to learn and the power to choose. This is why education and training are important. Human excellence, as distinct from animal excellence, takes basically four forms: excellence in performing, which is physical; excellence in making or creating, which is craftsmanship or art; excellence in thinking or devising, which is mental or intellectual; and excellence in character and social integration, which is moral. Attention is directed to the following concerns: professional pride and a sense of craftsmanship in one's job; excellence in the arts; national life or public affairs; and excellence in the educational system. Humanistic education is the activity of considering the most significant questions and that promotes growth, change, inquiry, and calls for critical thinking and independent judgment. (SW)

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO

HONORS DAY ADDRESS

THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

SYDNEY J. HARRIS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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JOHN H. RUSSEL CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

THE UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO
HONORS DAY

University Honors Day is a tradition founded in nearly a half century of The University of Toledo's recognition of superior scholastic achievement of its students. The University Honor Society was founded in May of 1935 by action of the University Faculty and was to elect students to membership who were in the top three percent of the junior class and the top five percent of the senior class.

The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi was sanctioned by the University Faculty in April of 1952 taking the place of the University Honor Society.

The primary objective of the Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi is the recognition and encouragement of superior scholarship in all academic disciplines.

RECOGNITION OF EXCELLENCE

Honors Day at The University of Toledo is an occasion when we pause to remind ourselves of our reason for being. We turn a spotlight on those who have achieved a level of academic excellence of which we can all be proud. We proclaim a renewed dedication to projects which will raise us to even higher levels of excellence in another year.

It is on Honors Day that we again declare it is our purpose to preserve, disseminate, and discover knowledge. We pay respect to those sound minds which the University has helped to sharpen and develop to the point where new questions can be asked in such a fashion as to move understanding to a new and higher plateau.

The celebration of Honors Day includes faculty in full academic dress and is marked by all of the pomp and circumstance of high ceremony. Students, professors, parents, and the general public have invested time, money, and energy in a variety of intellectual experiences. Those who are honored on the day are ones whose investments have been highly productive. The University shares both directly and vicariously in this activity. It is this Honors Day which renews our faith in tomorrow and which persuades us that education is the cornerstone of the foundation upon which our society rests.

Honors Day is an occasion on which we honor excellence. Each student whose achievements are recognized on this date has reached a level of accomplishment which matches standards the University has defined as symbolic of excellence. Having reached this height the student discovers that the peg for which he strains has been moved a notch higher. Excellence is thus constantly redefined as the University moves immediately toward the next Honors Day.

It is often declared that a university rests on a triad of teaching, research, and service. This is an appropriate pronouncement which begins to separate the university from other institutions, and to provide it with a unique character and identity.

Effective teaching and its companion, learning — is the element of the university mission which sets it apart. There are many agencies devoted to service and we are all familiar with the research corporation or institute. However, it is only the university which adds teaching and combines all three. Of these, the first two — teaching and research — are so interactive as to be almost inseparable. If the professor is to continue to be effective it is necessary that he or she remain alert to and knowledgeable about developments at the cutting edge of the discipline being professed. Honors Day is the occasion when The University of Toledo gives its attention and respect to those students who have joined competent professors, and who have responded to high quality teaching and research with a quality of performance which we label excellent.

Honors Day on May 20, 1981 featured an address by Sydney J. Harris, which is found on the following pages. Mr. Harris has written eloquently of excellence. We were honored by his presence. May we follow his prescription, concerning ourselves less with learning answers already known, but learning to ask the right questions about the yet-to-be-known. And may the future of this University be such that its Honors Days will lead to that point where we will indeed know as much as we do not know.

Glen R. Driscoll
President
The University of Toledo

The University of Toledo

HONORS DAY

Wednesday, May 20, 1981

Order of Exercises

Prelude ..... Overture for Band
Mendelssohn

Processional ..... Crown Imperial March
Sir William Walton

Welcome
Glen R. Driscoll Ph.D.
President, The University of Toledo

The National Anthem ..... The Star Spangled Banner
Francis Scott Key

Invocation
Glen Hosman Ph.D.
Protestant Campus Minister

Honors Day Address
Sydney J. Harris

Presentation and recognition of Honors
William N. Free Ph.D.
Vice President for Academic Affairs

The Alma Mater ..... Fair Toledo
Gil and Jean Stroot Mohr '46

Recessional ..... The Rifle Regiment
John Philip Sousa
The Alumni Foundation March
David Mruzek
The University of Toledo March
David Jex

Music by The University of Toledo Band
Professor Jamie Hafner
Conductor

THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

By Sydney J. Harris

When St. Augustine began writing his treatise on "time," he opened with a peculiar disclaimer, which was both honest and necessary. He said: "If no one asks me what time is, I know what it is; but if someone should ask me, then I do not know what it is."

All of us are in this same paradoxical position when we confront the word "excellence," which is the subject of our discussion today. If no one asks us, we all know what excellence is; but if someone should ask us, we do not know what it is. This has been the case since the pre-Socratics, since Plato and Aristotle first used and examined the concept, down to the present time, despite all our new tools of knowledge.

In the ancient Greek, the quality was known as "arete." Most often, it has been translated into English as "virtue." This translation will no longer do, since "virtue" has narrowed its ordinary meaning in our language within the last century, and has a sexual connotation. The intrinsic "excellence" of an act, or of a person, is what the Greeks intended by the word — and this was conceived by them as the proper end of the Good Life. Arete is the standard for the human person by which Agathism is measured: only the person who has developed his excellences to the fullest capacity is capable of leading or enjoying the good life to the fullest.

There is a problem here that has lasted 2,500 years. Neither Plato nor Aristotle could adequately define "the Good," nor could they define the nature of human excellence. Before we begin to despair, let us keep in mind that the modern sub-atomic physicist cannot agree on what "light" really is, that there is no proper definition of "electricity," and no one can tell us what a "photon" or a "neutrino" really is. It is by their activities, their relationships and their known consequences that we grasp their presence.

The "Good," of which excellence is its mark, is a fundamental concept of the human personality, and fundamental concepts cannot be defined — or they would not

be fundamental. Children are fond of asking "What is electricity?" but not even the greatest scientist can answer such a question. Electricity is one of the fundamental conceptions of physics. Now the physicist can tell you what he means by an electric charge and by bodies as electrically charged. He can tell you the properties of these charges at rest and in motion; the connection between moving charges and magnetism; the circumstances in which there is a flow of electrical energy; how it can be converted into other forms of energy, and a thousand such things. In short, the correct question he can answer is "What does electricity?" not "What is electricity?" The former has a definite meaning and can be answered; the latter question means "Can you express what you know about electricity in terms of something more fundamental?" and the answer is definitely "No." We must have something in physics behind which we do not go; if it were not electricity, it would have to be some other conception.

Likewise, the naive question "What is excellence?" is unanswerable; "What does excellence?" is the most we can try to answer. Its nature is as mysterious as that of electricity, but its operations and manifestations are open for all to see, under the proper conditions. They are easiest to see in the physical skills, where the excellent performer wins the contest or breaks the record; a little harder in the arts, where it requires taste and experience to recognize that Bizet is excelled by Bach as much as Montiverdi is excelled by Mozart; but sooner or later there is unanimity of opinion on this. It is hardest of all in the moral and public realm, where such differing models as Gandhi and Churchill, Lincoln and Hitler, Castro and Arafat, compete with their various publics for a place of greatness or infamy in history. But even these tasks of judgment are easier than answering "What is electricity?"

So we should not feel ashamed or inferior because the greatest minds have been unable to express the essence of our subject. What is important is that we recognize human excellence in a number of dimensions, physical, mental, moral, and social, and that there has always been a common agreement among diverse cultures on the qualities that compose excellence, even though its nature continues to elude us.

When we observe a Borg on the tennis court, a Bobby Fischer over the chessboard, or an Arthur Schnabel over the keyboard, we applaud the exceptional arts and skills they bring to these pursuits even though these performers themselves cannot tell us how or in what ways they are able to accomplish what they do. Schnabel once remarked that the art of the piano does not consist in playing the notes, "but in the pauses between the notes." A mechanical player piano will make fewer mistakes than Schnabel in striking the right notes and will keep a stricter tempo, but a player piano has no excellence in conveying the inner beauty and meaning of a Schubert sonata or a Mozart concerto.

Likewise, great athletes cannot explain what they do and are notoriously unable to help others attain their excellence. In a physical discipline, whether it be a sport or an art, everything can be taught except the one thing that distinguishes the excellent from the merely competent. Crafts can be taught; but arts cannot be taught. They can only be learned.

Can the moral virtues, or excellence of character, be taught? The reply down the ages has been a resounding "No." Socrates failed with Alcibiades, his proudest pupil; Aristotle failed with Dionysius, a tyrant who learned all the wrong things for the wrong reasons. Jesus, of course, was a teacher, a rabbi, as well as a preacher. Of his twelve students, or disciples, one denied him, one betrayed him, and all twelve ran away from him in his time of trouble.

Yet, despite the bleakness of this philosophical and historical overview, all is not lost. What is needed is proper understanding of how human beings can acquire and develop excellences that are potential within all of us. Our earliest evidence is one of the most fascinating dialogs of Plato, the Meno, which is unique in its form. It is a dialog, but it has no dramatic setting. Plato opens most of his dialogs with a careful setting of the background and the characters. This one opens abruptly with a question: "Tell me, Socrates, is human excellence acquired by teaching, or by practice and, if by neither, does it come to man naturally or in some other fashion?"

We can gather here that Plato regards the topic of the means of acquiring human excellence (arete) so important that he will not waste time on dramatic setting. Also, here Socrates abandons his customary pretensions of ignorance and gives some direct answers. The conclusion to which Socrates is pushed by Meno's persistence is that human excellence is not the result of natural growth and is not the result of instruction. Here, incidentally, Plato got himself into the same sort of bind Aristotle reached when he said that only the good man can do good, and also that the good is only that which the good man can do. But which is prior, ontologically or in time, the good man or the good act? Aristotle's and Plato's conclusions are identical. It is through practicing the life of arete that arete dawns upon the soul. Human excellence cannot be taught, but individuals can be taught to recognize human excellence, and they can be taught how to do the acts of human excellence, and then arete itself may come, "as a gift of God." Arete cannot be taught, but the seeking of it can be taught. The rest depends upon what we would call "grace." This was a remarkable pre-Christian anticipation of the notion of grace, one of the reasons the Church built on Plato and Aristotle, by the way, rather than on other classical thinkers.

There are basically four qualities that go to make up excellence: efficiency, persistence, courage, and dexterity, in different degrees and combinations. Excellence is efficient: it makes a difficult act look simple; it is persistent: that is, not satisfied with less than the best it can do; it is courageous: taking chances and courting failures others avoid; and dexterous, of course, in whatever physical skills are involved.

Now, as a matter of fact, all this applies to other animals, even insects, as much as to man. Indeed, we cannot claim any natural pre-eminence for man in these measures of excellence. It is, in fact not success but failure that distinguishes man from the rest of animal creation. It is because man is maladjusted that he is unique in nature.

This maladjustment is evident in the gap between our capacity and our aspirations, between our performance and our vision and it accounts for all our distinctively human activities; scientific inquiry, artistic creation, philosophical speculation, and the supporting condition of them all,

historical experience. It is historical change, as distinct from the repetitive rhythm of biological process, that is peculiar to man and raises human life to a plane of its own.

Other creatures are perfected for their purpose, whether to fly, swim, run, fight, or hide; but their perfection is also an ultimate limitation. Man, that "forked radish" as Shakespeare called him, has two powers no others possess — the power to learn and the power to choose. That is why we are concerned with education and training, and the rest of the animal world is not. Other creatures have a nature; only man has a history. They can be only what they are; he can be nearly as high as the angels, or considerably lower than the apes. Given this power to learn, and this power to choose, the quest for excellence is a challenge as much as a problem, depending less upon fate or circumstance than upon man's own resources, his will, his skill and ultimately his wisdom.

Human excellence, as distinct from animal excellence, takes basically four forms: excellence in performing, which is physical; excellence in making or creating, which is craftsmanship or art; excellence in thinking or devising, which is mental or intellectual; and, finally, excellence in character and social interaction, which is moral. This is also, in my view, their ascending order of importance — though of course, different societies rank them differently. In ancient Sparta, military excellence was valued most highly; in modern America, physical excellence is most widely applauded, and certainly most abundantly rewarded, not only professionally, but even in our institutions that are presumably devoted to higher learning. It might be interesting to examine, for a moment, from a psychological point of view, one of the reasons we make this reversal of natural values, valuing the physical above the esthetic, the mental and the moral, at least in terms of popularity and reward.

Excellence excites and awes us, if we understand it and can sense it. We are delighted by splendid specimens whether they be flowers, beasts or men. A superb performance interests us even more because it reveals to us the magnitude of what can be done. Illustrating perfection, it gives us a measure for whatever else we do.

Unlike other beings, man has the ability to appreciate the excellent, the desire to achive it, and the wish to share in it, even vicariously. Even though it may embarrassingly point up the fact that we as individuals are defective, less than we might have been, we like to look upon it. It is what ought to be.

As we know, there are many ways in which men are excellent. Some have great character; their public acts serve as carriers for admirable, privately sustained virtues. Other men achieve a stature far greater than the rest by making an art of living and impressing this on the course of history. Others are genuinely pious and infuse their relations with their fellows with sacred values, with self-sacrifice even unto death. Teachers of mankind, they often outlast and outstrip those who rule nations and command armies. Yet others are truly wise, sages who embody what they know, like Socrates in the West, the Buddha and Lao-Tse in the East.

These excellent men are rare exceptions. Large enough for all of us to see, they are too large for most of us to imitate, except at some remove. As Paul Weiss, Sterling professor of philosophy at Yale, has observed in his book, *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry*, it is easier for most men to reach, not an excellence which requires them to first attain some perfection privately and then to impose it on a public body or world, but an excellence which results from a mastery of the body or of the things in the world. Young men, especially, find it easier to master their bodies than to be truly noble, monumental, pious or wise. Thus, the compelling attraction of athletics! As P. S. Frederickson notes, "There is no society known to man which does not have games of the sort in which individuals set up purely artificial obstacles and get satisfaction from overcoming them."

We know we cannot behave like a Lincoln or a Gandhi, compose like a Mozart, paint like a Rembrandt, think like a Newton or an Einstein. Nothing we can do will make us much better in these respects. But we can improve our bodies, to run faster, jump higher, acquire more endurance and strength. In short, we can fantasize ourselves as physical specimens of excellence, and identify with champions, whereas no act of imagination can place us in the pantheon of the immortals in the more rarified realms of excellence.

There is a second, compelling reason, why most men are more easily able to identify with physical excellence than with other kinds. We seem to be built with two differing needs in terms of personal achievement. The ancients called these the "honorable" and the "useful," or the liberal and the servile. The useful or servile needs are concerned with our livelihood and our material satisfactions; we fulfill these needs not for their own sake, but for the sake of some other practical end — to eat, to keep ourselves warm, to protect ourselves from want or accident. We gather wood not for the gathering, but for the fire; we grow wheat not for the growing, but for the food.

But man also has a built-in need for internal satisfactions that are an end in themselves and are in no way useful. These needs are expressed in the arts and crafts and also in what we call "hobbies" as well as in gymnastics and athletic contests, which are engaged in purely for their own sake, for the sense of satisfaction they give us. These pursuits reach after perfection as a goal in itself.

The committed craftsman or artist of any kind exemplifies this uniquely human need. He will not let a work leave his hands until he has given it his best. And even then he may feel there is still better to come. Picasso, when asked what, in his opinion, was his greatest work, always replied, "My next one." Degas, when visiting friends who had paintings of his on the walls, would often bring his paints along and had to be physically restrained from improving them. Monet did more than forty paintings of Rouen Cathedral, and we still don't know if he thought he had got it absolutely right.

Tolstoy wrote seven separate versions of *War and Peace* before letting his publisher have the manuscript. There is an old proverb: "The good is the enemy of the best." This is the artist's attitude, "good enough" may be good enough for what is merely useful, but it is not good enough for work that has perfection as its goal. Michelangelo took four years to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and would have taken longer if the Pope had not threatened to excommunicate him.

Again, since most of us lack the talent, the pertinacity, the fortitude, and the dedication of the artist, our internal need for a self-fulfilling activity evinces itself in games and sports,

which have no end beyond themselves and serve no purpose except self-expression. Since all of us are exposed to games when we are young, and only the specially gifted move toward the arts, we can most easily identify with physical excellence as we grow older. Every fisherman hopes to catch that "big one," every golfer dreams of the hole in one; and even the third-string substitute on the freshman football team warms himself over his Walter Mitty vision of scoring the crucial touchdown in the last minute of play.

(Parenthetically, what is wrong with professionalism or commercialism in athletics is that the activity is no longer chiefly pursued for itself alone but rather for the sake of compensation which becomes the ruling and often the determing factor in the game. A headline in the Chicago *Tribune* sports page not long ago read: "Football Players Take Drugs to Maintain Excellence," and the article said many professional players dope themselves before a game. Obviously, this is not done to maintain excellence but to win, to achieve success, to excel. A horse that is doped before a race is ruled off the turf, and its handlers are fined because obviously it has an unfair advantage over its undoped rivals. If we learned that Man O' War had been doped before every race it won, we would strike its triumphs from the record. But when winning becomes necessary in order to insure a high salary, the player who takes an unfair advantage is no longer seeking excellence, any more than colleges that buy players under the table, that offer phony scholarships, and that forge academic transcripts for illiterate players. Professional sports in America is now a subsidiary of the television industry, which in turn is controlled by the advertising industry, and excellence has been subordinated to showmanship, while sport has been denuded of its singular virtue, which is sportsmanship.)

This digression aside, let us return to our mutton, as the French so aptly say, and consider where we have and do not have excellence in modern American society. I am not here to make evaluations or condemnations, but I think there is a general consensus on this matter, a sense of the community, as the Quakers call it.

As our basic perspective of excellence, and this, after all, is the subject of this Honors Day — I suggest we can hardly do

better than use that provided a half-century ago by Alfred North Whitehead, one of the seminal thinkers of our times. There are, he said, four basic fields in which excellence should be the concern of everyone, as a civilized human being:

First, a man or woman should know the highest standards and the best methods in his or her own job, so that it may be performed with professional pride and a sense of craftsmanship.

Second, if they are not to be narrowly limited human beings; they must seek for excellence in the arts that reveal and adorn man's character; in literature and music, art and architecture; those endeavors that raise us above the brutes.

Third, they should have a concept of excellence in our national life, and an overriding ideal to guide them in public affairs. With such an ideal positively activated, slums, disease, uneducated masses, hideous industrial towns, and a disfigured countryside would no longer blemish our society.

Finally, everyone should know what is excellent in human character and conduct — for everything, in the end, depends on this. A society which fails to show its young people something of these models of human excellence — from Socrates to Gandhi — sends them into life ignorant of the knowledge they need most.

Let me simply frame a number of questions, some perplexities and some paradoxes, that seem to be facing us as a people in the quest for excellence, and even, it might be said, in the recognition of excellence, which must precede its pursuit, or we will follow a will-o'-the wisp.

In the first area, that of professional pride and a sense of craftsmanship in one's job, there seems to be unanimous agreement that there has been a severe decline in the standards of quality and service. Of course, we must temper this criticism with a little historical perspective: almost every age has looked back nostalgically to an earlier period when there was more civility, more courtesy, more conscientiousness.

In his comedy, *As You Like It*, written in 1599, Shakespeare has Orlando praise his family servant, Adam, as "the constant service of the antique world," a noble throwback to the time retainers sweated from a sense of duty and not merely for

money. In the fashion of our times, Orlando complains, servants sweat only for promotion and when they get it they stop working hard. So we can see that this particular complaint is evidently as old as Shakespeare.

Nevertheless, even given this reservation, we cannot but doubt that there has been a sharp decline in this area within our own lifetimes. Commodities are not made to last, but to wear out. It is often cheaper to throw away a malfunctioning toaster or clock radio than to have it repaired; many service jobs, as well, are performed sloppily and indifferently, not to say dishonestly. If you know an honest and competent auto mechanic, you have a treasure beyond price.

Many people work when they feel like it, and stay away when they don't. Many are content to just "get by." Craftsmanship is a fast disappearing word in our modern technical society; only the rich can afford to pay premium prices for it. A century ago, William Morris sighed that "There is nothing that someone cannot make a little worse and sell a little cheaper," but today, it seems, they are made a little worse and sold at a higher price, with rare exceptions.

What is the reason, or reasons, for this pervasive attitude? Our differing responses seem to depend on where we stand individually on the political and economic spectrum. Some say that the encroachments of the "welfare state" have robbed people of initiative and energy: they prefer welfare to work, and unemployment insurance to continuous employment. Others insist that it is the growth of technology and the concentration of industry that are responsible: how can a man take pride in making the same automobile fender day after day, especially if he knows that when sales decline he may be laid off for a long period?

We know, at any rate, that many millions are alienated from their work; that a loyal, steady employee is hard to find; that cheating, theft, and embezzlement, are pandemic in the commercial world. So-called white collar crime, from international bribery to shoplifting by adolescents, accounts for many more billions of dollars lost than all other crimes combined. The line between the "respectable" and the "disreputable" people seems to be getting thinner year by year.

This increasing "anomie," as the sociologists call it, which is marked by a loss of social norms and values, seems part of the depersonalization and mechanization of modern life, in which a sense of community is shattered into individual fragments, and in which individualism degenerates into privatism. It is one of the most serious of our contemporary malaises, and we would do well to stop blaming and begin analyzing the multiple forces and pressures that account for it.

Along with this, we are also confronted by what we might call "the cult of mediocrity," which represents a degeneration of the democratic ideal. When our forefathers, all educated men, promulgated the terms of our new nation, as a land dedicated to equal opportunity for all, regardless of birth, wealth or national origin, it was anticipated that this would allow all to rise to the level of the highest, insofar as individual capacities would admit.

Instead, somehow, we have misconceived the idea of democracy as a falling toward the lowest common denominator — anything above that being viewed suspiciously as "elitism." But elitism and superiority are not the same thing. The first elitism, consists of a self-appointed group based on quite arbitrary standards, usually decided by the group itself. The second, superiority, is a natural aptitude that is encouraged and rewarded for the sake of the good of the community as a whole.

When we are sick, we want the best doctor; when we are in trouble, we want the best lawyer; when we send our children to school, we want the best teachers. This is not "elitism," is is prudence and good sense. When we insist that students meet certain standards, and be given the same kind of education that is fitting for all free men and women, we are not fostering elitism; rather, we are attempting to bring out the full humanhood of each person. It may be important to teach people how to make a living; it is important to teach them how to live, which is the prime purpose of an educational institution. Unless they are exposed to a knowledge of the goods in their order, unless they learn to distinguish the better from the worse, they are fit only to be slaves, not free men and women. It seems to me that we require a serious re-examination of the democratic doctrine, and a clarification of what "all men are equal" really meant, and should mean to us.

In the second area, that of excellence in the arts which reveal and adorn man's character, (we really should devote a whole separate seminar to this complex subject, which I am afraid we are scarcely equipped even to barely touch upon today), we in America, especially, look upon the arts as frosting on the cake; as a marginal and largely decorative activity, vastly subordinate to the real business of making a living and getting ahead in the world.

The arts are, and have been, the ugly stepsisters in American culture which is dominated by mass entertainment designed either to narcoticize us or to induce us to buy commodities. But the legitimate end of the arts is something quite different: to enrich our imaginative life, to sound depths within us not reached by other means, to offer solace and reflection and insight into the meaning and pattern of our lives, to refresh our spirits and to take us out of petty egos into a realm other creatures cannot realize. Nothing can counteract the gross materialism of any age more effectively than participation in and appreciation of the arts; yet, in our society, we have permitted it to become a plaything for cultural snobs, or an academic exercise to fulfill a credit, or an outlet for philanthropy that wants to buy its way into high society.

(Actually, in some schools today, art and music are accounted for as "frills" by some misguided "back to the basics" reformers, who at the same time seem to regard driver instruction and marching bands and football teams as essential to the structure of education!)

In the third area, the concept of excellence in our national life is an overriding ideal to guide us in public affairs. This has always been more of a vision than a reality in any given society. Except in rare periods of civil or national crisis, people have always voted their pocketbooks, their passions and their prejudices.

But, at the same time, if a society is going to have stability and development, these motives need to be balanced by some consideration of the general public welfare, or conflicting goals will cancel each other out and legitimate needs will not be satisfied. We find, for instance, that nearly every group is "against" excessive government spending, but no group

considers spending that benefits itself to be "excessive." And it is generally the most powerful, best organized and best financed groups that obtain congressional support for their programs, even though the majority of citizens may not favor them.

In terms of political excellence, the popular complaint today is that candidates for office — up to and including the presidential level — do not offer an adequate choice of men whose ability and integrity we can have faith in. More than half the people do not bother to vote at all; and many who do would seemingly prefer to cast a ballot for "None of the Above."

How can we achieve excellence in public life? I do not know the answer to this thorny question. Plato said that the only people who deserve to be given power are those who do not want it. The trouble is that those who do not want it are unprepared to use it and unwilling to accept it. This is the great perennial paradox of leadership; only one man in a million is like Cincinnatus, who left the plow to lead his people, and then returned to the plow when the crisis ended.

The late Adlai Stevenson once observed that "The problem with the Presidency is that by the time you receive the nomination you are no longer worthy to have it." By this he meant that a politician, in order to rise to that height, has to sink to certain depths earlier in his career, has to make deals, make promises, make compromises, and become indebted to special interests. Candidates are fond of attacking politics and Washington and bureaucracy, but they themselves are an inextricable part of that system, as we learn after their election.

How can we resolve this dilemma? Where is excellence to be found, how is it to be encouraged, how can it survive within the trade-offs of the political process? How can we persuade voters to be more rational in their choices, to support policies that are broadly beneficial rather than narrowly privileged? How can we get citizens to take a long-term rather than a short-term view of their best interests, to endorse a candidate because of his overall ability and integrity rather than because they agree with him on a single issue, such as ERA or abortion or gun-control? These are the questions we should be asking.

At any rate, it is unrealistic to ask that people vote unselfishly. It is reasonable to propose that most of us take a longer and broader view and recognize that legislation on our behalf that works a real hardship on other elements is not in the long run going to do the nation any good, and that selfishness in public life, no less than in private life, disintegrates the community and eventually confers benefits on no one. This leads, of course, directly into our fourth, and most important area; the knowledge of what is excellent in human character and conduct.

We are now transcending the realm of education as such, for neither character nor conduct can be taught in any formal way. This is the juncture at which the intellectual and the moral virtues meet. Aristotle tells us that only the good man can be wise, and only the wise can be good. Doubtless that is true, but not terribly helpful.

Moral education can be offered as a course, but while it may make the student more educated, it will not necessarily make him more moral — or moral at all. And wisdom, of course, cannot be transmitted by any means known to man — only information and knowledge can be transmitted. The smartest men are not the best men, as we all know, and yet goodness cannot fulfill itself unless supported and directed by wisdom and understanding. Only the saint can be simple and good.

How do we get out of this impasse? Not by preaching, surely, not by speeching and teaching. It is not entirely a lost cause, because we do know that people change as they grow older. They come under different influences, they see different models, they learn through trial and experience — although some learn the wrong things if they have the wrong experiences. But character and conduct, though set in the early years, are not frozen. Quite apart from religious conversion, of which St. Augustine's *Confessions* are the most dramatic, people seem able to shed the pure egoism of infancy and self-centeredness of adolescence as they grow older and learn that maturity entails reciprocity, that moral and religious strictures are not abstract rules handed down from on high but, if they are genuine, conform to the deepest psychological needs of the human person. Life, itself, if we are open to it, imposes these lessons upon us.

There is a story about a newspaper reporter interviewing a very old man with a wide reputation for wisdom. He was asked how he had acquired his wisdom. "From my good judgment," he replied. "And where did you get your good judgment?" was the next question. The old man snorted, "From my bad judgment."

But it is a mistake to think simply that we learn from experience. As Frederick the Great said when an officer propsed himself for promotion because he had been through ten campaigns with Emperor. "My donkey has been through ten campaigns with me also, and he knows no more now than he did after the first one."

Experience is not a teacher, it is a lesson; and whether we learn that lesson well, or badly, or not at all, depends upon the influences we remain open to during the learning process. These influences are personal, intellectual, and moral. They come from our family, our friends, our social circle; they come from our teachers and advisers and counselors, if they are qualified; and they come from exposure to models of character and conduct — those few living around us and those, not many more, in history who have shown us what men and women can be and should be.

We call them the "humanities" because they are designed to make men and women more human not more efficient, or more successful, or more popular, or more powerful. And excellence, in all its dimensions, is what being human is all about. It is our proper end.

As a final note, where do we find excellence in the educational system? We find it mostly at the post-graduate level, in the professional schools. Our educational system turns out the finest doctors, the most skilled lawyers, the ablest architects and engineers. And we find it of course, in athletics. Here the quest for excellence is relentless, dedicated and invariably applauded.

But in this training for the job or profession, the factor of character and conduct is too often forgotten or obscured. We buy and sell athletes, both under and over the table, and so the technical excellence of their function is corrupted and corroded by the duplicitous atmosphere that pollutes the cleanliness of the contest.

What are some of the common complaints we hear about the lawyer in our society, some justified and some not? That he isn't interested in justice, in fairness, in equity; he is interested only in winning, and in his own gain. The better we train a lawyer, the worse a man he becomes, if he does not employ his talents to the end of the common good, including, but not exclusively, the good of his client. Only humanistic education, education about values and priorities, which will help give him an understanding of his own truest human needs and the basic needs of society, will transform him from a splendid technician to a good citizen and a good person.

More often than necessary in our society, the best lawyers have the worst clients and the best doctors see only the most affluent patients (plus a few charity cases to salve their consciences); and the best engineers and architects rarely question whether the skyscrapers they put up and the bridges they build and the highways the construct are serving a sound social end. Only now, with our recent awareness of the ecological pit we have dug for ourselves, are we beginning to question whether certain things should be done or not. Until then, if it was technically possible and fiscally profitable, we went ahead and did it, asking no embarrassing questions about the common good.

Knowledge without values is a dangerous tool. Carl Sandburg told of the convict being paroled who said to his cell mate: "When I get out I'm going to study and educate myself hard. Then, when you're still a common thief, I'll be an embezzler!"

When I talk about education in this broad sense, I am using Albert Einstein's famous definition. He said that "education is that which remains after you have forgotten everything you learned at school." This was more than a witticism at the expense of teachers and textbooks. He meant that education is not a mass of facts, or inert ideas, as Whitehead called them but an attitude, an appetite, and approach, a frame of mind, a function of the full personality, of the will, the spirit, and the imagination, as much as of the intellectual force.

It is not so much the content of humanistic education that is important as the activity itself. It is the activity of dealing with the most significant questions of mankind that keeps us

growing, changing, inquiring, and calls for critical thinking and independent judgment. Most of us give up this attitude when we sink into a career; we are too busy or too worried or too tired. If we don't get it in the colleges and universities, it is infinitely hard to retrieve it. The doctor can hardly keep up with his two journals, the AMA Journal and the Wall Street Journal. Like the Red Queen in Alice, most of us are forced to run as fast as we can just to stay in the same place.

An inquiry into the pursuit of excellence may not give us answers, but it will force us to begin to ask the right questions. And questions are more important than answers, because as long as we persist in asking the wrong ones, the right ones grow dimmer and more distant and harder to grasp. St. Jerome tells us that when we begin to search for God, we have already found Him. I like to think that much the same is true in our quest for excellence.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

If the reader wonders why so lengthy a bibliography for so brief a talk, the explanation is embarrassingly simple. Wilson Mizener once observed that "To steal from one writer is plagiarism; to steal from six writers — that is 'research'." In preparing this talk, I did considerable research, under pressure of time and with an inexperienced assistant. Since some of the notes given me were divorced from their sources and in some cases may have lacked the proper quotation marks and attributions, I am trying to make amends as best I can with this bibliography.

Had I any notion at the time that this talk might be printed, and not just given once to a transient audience, I would have taken greater pains to track down and credit the various sources. To any whose words or thoughts have been thus appropriated, I apologize in advance, and can only plead in extenuation that in 38 years of writing a daily column, I have been, like King Lear, far more often sinned against than sinning in this respect.

S.J.H.

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